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ABSTRACT

The content of a literature program defined in terms of the structure of literature is proposed. A three-layer definition of structure is suggested which considers (1) the substance of literature, including man and his gods, man and the natural world, man and other men, and man and himself; (2) mode in literature, including the romantic, comic, tragic, and ironic; and (3) form in literature, including genres, elements of structure, and certain stylistic devices. The content of the program will include concern with the literary works in terms of concepts and archetypal themes relevant to the developmental level of the students. It is suggested that the content of a literature program will become more meaningful if the following allied activities are incorporated: (1) discussion to illuminate the student's reading of a work and to increase ability to deal with genre; (2) oral and dramatic activities for providing students with another dimension of experience with literature and to aid comprehension and appreciation; and (3) writing activities, including noncritical, interpretive or critical, and imaginative. (CL)

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THE CONTENT OF LITERATURE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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Last summer I sat one morning with the English Teachers of a large senior high school in Florida. We were to discuss plans for the year's program in literature. The first question for discussion was: What novels should be studied in common by the students in the tenth grade? Then we went on to what novels should be studied in the eleventh and twelfth grades, and then, of course, on to short stories, plays, and poems. End of anecdote--a non-seismic one indeed, but it introduces a necessary preliminary point: the need to differentiate between content and materials in the literature program. In curriculum planning traditionally, the two have not been differentiated. Curriculum decisions in literature have begun with the kinds of questions my teachers asked: what selections will be studied at what level, or, more simply, what series of textbook-anthologies will be

adopted. One eventually does get to the specifics of selections to be studied, but in so doing one is concerned with materials, not content. Today, determining the content of the literature program is not establishing a canon of literature to be studied. The content of the program, as opposed to the enabling materials, is two-dimensional, I think. First, and fundamental, are concepts concerning literature as art and as experience. Second, certain activities in which students engage when studying literature may be considered allied content.

Concepts as Content

The concepts to be at the heart of the curriculum will be identified, in turn, on the basis of some definition of the structure of literature. In the absence of clear agreement on the structure of literature, I propose a structure, a three-layered one--substance, mode, and form--and I suggest that students should develop some concepts about each of these elements at each level of the school. Substance, of course, refers to what literature is about, and it seems to me that all literature is about man in four major relationships: man and his gods, man and the natural world, man and other men, and man and himself. Out of these relationships come the archetypal themes or central myths of human experience--the quest myth, the edenic or alienation myth, the initiation myth, the demonic myth, the Faustian myth, and so forth. It is important that the student deal with these relationships and these archetypal themes or myths as he studies literature.

Identification of archetypal themes or myths can greatly inform the study of American literature, for example, and provide at least

a partial answer to the question, "What is American about American literature?" Certain patterns of belief and of behavior have taken on the qualities of myth in the American culture. Major among these, more or less in the chronology of their development, are these:

1. The Puritan myth, or the dangers of happiness. One archetypal literary figure in this myth might be that most unhappy man Ethan Frome.
2. The frontier myth of the unlimited possibilities for the individual who has strength, courage, and wit. Here, the great archetypal figure, I suppose, is Lincoln.
3. The myth of the significance of the individual's everyday life, given great voice in Whitman's Leaves of Grass, for instance, and in some contemporary poetry.
4. The myth of the importance of material success, more often attacked than celebrated in literature.
5. The myth of youth's alienation from adult society, developed in the past twenty years. Holden Caulfield of Salinger's Catcher in the Rye is one of its most widely known archetypal figures.

Mode in Literature

Mode refers to the general point of view on life experience which a literary selection represents. Since each work is by an individual, that individual's vantage point on life is often evident, though many selections cannot be classified neatly as to mode. The modal approach has been given especial vitality through the work of Northrop Frye who

identifies four modes--romantic, comic, tragic, and ironic. Frye, in his book, Fables of Identity,* identifies basic modes in terms of the human condition which they frame: the nature and predicament of the hero or protagonist. If the hero is superior in degree to other men and to his environment, we have the typical romance and its literary affiliates, the legend and folktale. If the protagonist is superior in degree to other men and is a leader but is not superior to his natural environment, we have the hero of most tragedy and epic. If the hero is superior neither to other men nor to his environment, we have the comic mode. If he is inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves so that we have a sense of looking down on a scene of frustration or absurdity, the protagonist belongs to the ironic mode. The value to the student of the modal approach, I think, is to enrich the possibilities of literature as a study of the human condition.

Form refers to the various genres and sub-genres of imaginative literature--fiction, poetry, and drama--as well as to certain elements of structure--point of view, setting, dialogue, and the like--and to certain devices--metaphor and symbol, for instance--which are common to more than one genre. It is concern with form that basically differentiates study of literature from study of psychology, sociology, ethics, or something else.

Once the teacher has determined the concepts he wishes to develop,

*New York: Harcourt, 1963, p. 16.

he is ready to select literary materials appropriate for the level of given groups of students, selections not only in the printed form but in the non-print media as well. In most schools, literature study must take on a more gut-level quality than it now has--strong beer not pink lemonade. Adolescents themselves will make it thus, if not in school then out of it, where movies such as The Graduate and Midnight Cowboy are more impactful than Our Town, where novels such as I Never Promised You a Rose Garden and Giovanni's Room are more memorable than Great Expectations, where Simon and Garfunkel are more relevant than Wordsworth and Masefield.

Allied Activities

The second and subsidiary dimension of content in literature involves the happenings in the classroom surrounding the study of literature, activities which may have values in themselves but which are also allied to developing the concepts I have been talking about. Chief among these activities are: 1. Discussion (or "talk" as some British educators prefer); 2. Certain oral and dramatic activities; and 3. Certain writing activities.

A crucial point in the teaching of literature is that at which teacher and students discuss a selection read in common. Too often this is unfortunately the point at which teachers "have discussion" with no real objectives in mind, or at which, conversely, teachers pry out of students the school solutions to the selection. Group discussion of a work, with a teacher posing well conceived convergent and divergent questions, can serve two general objectives: 1. illuminate the student's reading of the work and increase his involvement with it; 2. increase

his ability to deal with the particular genre or matters of form which the work represents.

Edward J. Gordon has proposed a useful paradigm for questioning which may furnish the basis for talk about a work.* Gordon's hierarchy of five levels of questions is based on the degree of abstraction demanded by each level, as follows (material in parentheses is the author's, not Gordon's):

1. Questions requiring the student to remember a fact in a selection

   (What objects did the poet refer to?

   What happened in the story immediately after the storm?)

2. Questions that require the student to prove or disprove a generalization someone else has made

   (One critic has said that _____. Can you cite any examples from the novel to substantiate this?)

   (Or the teacher may pose an hypothesis for the students to prove or disprove:

   This story is an attack upon _____.)

3. Questions that require the student to derive his own generalizations

   (What relationship do the coffee drinking scenes in the novel have to the central theme?

   How does the poet make use of flower symbols?

   If there is little or no response to the question, the teacher needs to go back to simpler levels and build up to this level again: Where is a red rose referred to in the poem? Can you

*"Levels of Teaching and Testing," English Journal, XLIV (September 1955), 330-334.

find any support for this interpretation: The rose symbolizes _____. Now what other flower symbols do you find?)

4. Questions that require the student to generalize about the relation of the total work to human experience
(What is the universal human problem dramatized in _____?)
5. Questions that require the student to carry generalizations derived from the work into his own life
(Is the kind of experience which this poem glorifies one that your friends value?)

Oral and dramatic activities also may be important concomitants of study of literature. Oral reading of literature--by students and teachers or from recordings--perhaps has two major purposes: 1. the esthetic one of providing another dimension of experience with literature and 2. the practical one of aiding comprehension and appreciation. Listening to literature read aloud is an experience many students recall with pleasure from their English classes. Rather frequently oral reading is an aid to heightened comprehension, for example in increasing awareness of the effect of literary devices. Certain poems must be read aloud if students are to sense the effect of particular types of rhyme or meter or appreciate elements such as tone color.

Dramatic activities, particularly improvised drama, have gained considerable importance recently, both in this country and in England, as an integral part of the literature program. Various benefits are claimed for such activities, but the particular contribution of improvised drama to the study of literature is summarized by James Moffett in his pamphlet on dramatic activities.

Before a child can enjoy drama in script form--play reading--he can do so by creating the imitative actions of which scripts are a blueprint. Later, his power to bring a script alive in his mind is constantly recharged by his continued experience in inventing dramas. For narrative, improvisation renders a special service: it translates what happened back to what is happening. . . .For older students, converting narrative to drama demonstrates the relationship of the two: plays specify what narrative summarizes, and narrative, unlike drama, is told by someone addressing us.

And, finally, improvisation can be used as an entree into a literary work soon to be read: the teacher abstracts key situations--say, Cassius' efforts to persuade Brutus to join the conspiracy--and assigns this as a situation to improvise before students read the work, so that when they do read it they already have an understanding of what is happening and of how differently the characters might have behaved. This kind of prelude also involves students more with the text.*

Writing about Literature

Much of the writing program, though not necessarily all of it, can grow out of the study of literature. There seem to be three basic kinds of writing related to literature study: (1) Noncritical writing for which ideas or literary elements in a selection serve as springboards;

*Drama: What Is Happening. (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1967), pp. 27-28.

(2) Interpretative and critical writing; (3) Imitative writing.

Writing about literature that is read is a long-established activity of the high school English class. Teachers frequently use literature to motivate writing, with students further developing points raised in class discussion or attempting to imitate writer's styles or techniques, and student skill in criticism or interpretation is frequently tested through writing assignments. Probably the most valuable type of writing as a component of literature study is that designed to expand or clarify central concepts. This type of writing may be illustrated by this assignment given by a teacher to his eleventh-grade class which had studied the novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers:

> In our discussion of The Heart...we have talked about the quest motif or quest myth. Each of the major characters in the novel are in quest of something. Most of them, we noted, are unsuccessful. Think of another selection of literature you have read in which the quest myth is present. Discuss the nature of the quest(s) and compare the treatment of it with that in The Heart. Was the quest successful or not? What obstacles were there in the path of the quest?

Oral and written activities, then, may be considered part of the content of the literature program when they are directly allied to deepening and reinforcing the concepts which are the heart of the matter.

I have tried to say in essence that the content of the literature program is defined not in terms of a canon of literature but rather in terms of concepts concerning substance, mode, and form in literature. Concept development, of course, rests on materials and on certain activities which become the allied content of the program. The objective of it all as a totality is an intangible but vital goal: the birth of a literary sensibility on the part of all students.